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“For with god all things are possible”: Philip Roth’s “The conversion of the Jews”

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"For with god all things are possible": Philip Roth's "The conversion of the Jews"

Theoharis Constantine Theoharis

- 1 The term "other" can express a relation of simple opposition--the reverse, "the other side of the coin," or a relation of simple identity--the additional, "the other penny." Very often, though, the relation presented by the "other" involves a complex and dynamic fusion of opposition and identity. Literature and philosophy and religion may reasonably be thought of as attempts to disclose the laws by which that fusion works, to make its energy our own. The natural sciences and the humanistic disciplines have long given the name "conversion" to the process by which opposition yields up identity. For centuries the phrase "conversion of the Jews" has been a trope for the pragmatically unlikely, the tragically impossible, the heroically resisted, the idealistically sought for event. Andrew Marvell plays wittily on all these meanings in his carpe diem love lyric "To his Coy Mistress". If the two had "World enough, and Time," the speaker promises gallantly, he would woo her indefinitely while she could, if she "please, refuse/Till the Conversion of the Jews." The complex reversal invoked and forestalled by axiomatic reference to the "conversion of the Jews," is, of course, the acceptance by the Jews of Christ's, and Christianity's claim that Jesus is the fusion raising all oppositions into redemptive identity, that he is God for us and with us, our life, whether we are for him or not, our joy if we are. Two faiths separated by a common dogma, monotheism, Christianity and Judaism are locked in a simple credal opposition--God is One, that One is Three. God is not only the unmultiplied other, but most crucially the unassimilable and unassimilating other for Jews; from Jesus forward, he is another one of us, any one of us, all of us, for Christians. The history of the Jews in Christian times has been a struggle with assimilation. They are the paradigmatic "other," always struggling with the simple and complex meaning of being different, and always bringing Christians to struggle with the same problem. Christians have carried out the struggle violently, almost entirely antagonistically, and mostly unsuccessfully; Jews have prevailed by suffering stubbornly and righteously past the Christian campaign of assimilation through annihilation. Wittily,

elegantly, and with elemental humanistic dignity, Philip Roth takes all these matters up in the story of obdurate Ozzie Freedman's unconventionally righteous preparation for his Bar Mitzvah.

- 2 Ozzie, like Socrates, confronts the false necessities of his world by persistently exceeding them. As Roth puts it, "What Ozzie wanted to know was always different."¹ During afternoon Hebrew school, which Roth depicts with genially burlesque comedy, Ozzie has wanted to know something different three times. Each desire has ended in the dreaded summons of his mother to the Rabbi's office. The first time he required Rabbi Binder to resolve the contradiction between his instruction that the Jews are God's chosen people and the Declaration of Independence's claim that all men are created equal. When Binder offered a distinction between political and spiritual identities, Ozzie discounted it, insisting that what he wanted to know was something different. The implication Roth makes here is that Ozzie wanted to know why the Rabbi made the incoherent statement to begin with, not how he can get himself out of it, why, in other words, being Jewish can never mean being created equal. The second question is similar: why did his mother single out the eight Jewish deaths in a plane crash as tragic, ignoring the rest. To Binder's inadequate citation of cultural unity, Ozzie responds not only that he wanted to know something different, but when pressed to accept it, blurts out that he wishes all fifty-eight victims had been Jews. Mrs. Freedman is summoned again. The exasperated response again annuls the privilege of Jewish "difference," substituting a comically punitive, absurd compassion, a Marx brother's quip, along with the anger--if they all had been Jews, his cracked logic runs, there would be less of what Ozzie cannot understand and more compassion.
- 3 The third connundrum is the worst, and centers on the dividing line of Christianity and Judaism: the human and divine status of Jesus. If God is omnipotent, Ozzie asks, how can Binder claim that he could not father Jesus on Mary without intercourse? Roth makes much of the snickering comedy attending thirteen year-old male inquiry into this subject, as in this exchange: "'Sure its impossible. That stuff's all bull. To have a baby you gotta get laid,' Itzie theologized. 'Mary hadda get laid'" (R, p. 140). As the story begins, Ozzie has not yet responded to Binder's evasive restatement that the historicity of Jesus excludes his divine status, except to say again that he wants to know something different. The implied object of inquiry here is how can being Jewish, an identity established in righteous worship of an omnipotent God, require a stiffnecked limitation of that omnipotence. The bulk of the action takes place on Wednesday afternoon, the day his mother has to come and account a third time to Binder for her son's insubordinate recalcitrance. Ozzie has told her why she's been summoned again, and her response, over Sabbath supper, has been to slap his face.
- 4 Before she arrives Ozzie and Binder have a blowout, in which Ozzie challenges the Rabbi with the question, "Why can't He make anything He wants to make?," and then assaults him with the rebellious insult "You don't know! You don't know anything about God!" (R, p146). Binder responds with an accidental blow to Ozzie's nose; a nosebleed, and a chase ensue, and the scene ends with Ozzie on the roof of the synagogue, and the other boys, with Binder, on the sidewalk staring up at him. Binder commands Ozzie to descend, unavailingly, at which point the dotty caretaker of the synagogue calls the fire department to get Ozzie off the roof, because he once got a cat off his roof that way. Going to the roof to flee repudiated and discredited religious instruction, Ozzie starts his real initiation into manhood. Accordingly, he's confused about what he's done, initially. The

first question, Is it me up here?, yields quickly to a subtler pair--is the question Is it me on the roof, or Is it me who called Binder a bastard? The split inquiry presents the split status of the boy straining to become the man in Ozzie, and the division is quickly dispelled once his identity as defier is established by Binder's command that he descend immediately. Establishing him as Ozzie, the command ironically fills him with a feeling of peace and power. The first strain toward adulthood is finished, and the irenic potency it bestows will swell soon into comic resolution of Christian and Jewish theological and cultural difference as Ozzie compels, in his peculiar way, childrens' and adults' submission to his righteousness, his difference.

- 5 Enter the firemen. Roth turns the escalating circumstances deftly thematic by having Binder opportunistically respond to the fireman's appropriate but mistaken questions Is the kid nuts, Is he going to jump? with the terrified lie "Yes, Yes, I think so...He's been threatening to..." (R, p. 151). Ozzie registers Binder's cowardly fraud, and responds to the matter of fact fireman's challenge ...jump or don't jump. "But don't waste our time, willya?" by playing with the power incompetent and indifferent adults have just accidentally and formally bestowed on him (R, p. 152). The moment is a comic masterpiece, and teasingly ethnic, sounding what Joyce in *Ulysses* calls the Jewish "accent of the ecstasy of catastrophe" in a sequence of events that fractures and preserves the formal logic of cause and effect.² To torment the Rabbi, impress his friends, lord it over the firemen, and match the new man he's becoming to the boy he still is, Ozzie calls back, "I'm going to jump" (R, p. 152). He runs back and forth on the roof, feigning to jump from one side and the other, pulling the crowd with him like a puppet-master. A competition then ensues, as Itzie, who's caught on to the anarchic power Ozzie wields, counters Binder's "Please don't jump," with his call for Ozzie to do so, a call taken up by all the other boys (R, p. 153). Eventually they reduce Binder to tears, in a triumph of the adolescent will.
- 6 Enter, at precisely that moment, the mother. When she asks Binder what Ozzie's doing on the roof, the Rabbi stays mute with humiliated fear and anguish. To her plea that Binder get Ozzie down from the roof and prevent him from accidentally killing himself, the Rabbi pleads impotence, explaining to Mrs. Freedman that Ozzie wants to kill himself to please the boys urging him to do so. The mother finishes the cleric's logic by calling her son down: "Don't be a martyr, my baby" (R, p. 155). Binder repeats this last plea to Ozzie, and the boys immediately turn the infantilizing parental counsel to their advantage. Following Itzie's lead they all shout out in chorus to their heroic rebel leader to gawhead and "Be a Martin, be a Martin..." (R, p. 155). Their ignorance of what they're asking, comically indicated by their changing of the sacred role into a common name, signals that Ozzie's championing of Jesus has reached a new ironic level in the story.
- 7 The scene Roth evokes here is from the three temptations Jesus undergoes in the wilderness before he starts his ministry.
- 8 Matthew 4, 5-7:

Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.
- 9 The logic of the story casts Binder as the original tempter here. He put Ozzie onto the pinnacle of the synagogue, and first put the idea of jumping into Ozzie's head. The boys

have usurped and transformed that unintended seduction. The Rabbi doesn't want the martyrdom at all, unlike Satan; the boys do, but not exactly for Satan's reason. Unlike the Biblical seducer, they have the angels immediately at hand, those put upon firemen, and they are boys, and therefore can't belief in death and so don't envision or require any self-destruction in Ozzie's self-aggrandizing leap. The parental figures do, of course, see that death is really possible now, despite the firemen. Here Roth makes his criticism of Christian culture: its worship of martyrdom may too much resemble an incoherent adolescent frenzy delusionally aspiring to utopian and vain rebellion.

- 10 And where is Ozzie in all this? He's finally realized how strange the boys' request for him to jump is. The question he now poses to himself is no longer Is it me that counts up here on the roof, but "Is it us?...Is it us?" (R, p. 156). The issue, in other words, is cultural. Ozzie wonders if he can create an order of values for his fellows if he jumps. He asks himself if the singing would turn to dancing at his leap, if the jumping would stop anything in the culture of the parents or the boys. He has a fantasy of plucking a coin from the sun with an inscription do or don't written on it, and then hallucinates that each part of his body is taking a vote, independently of his will, on what he should do. The sun makes the decision for him, but not as he expected. The late afternoon gets suddenly darker, and the voices are subdued by the oncoming night. Ozzie makes his mother, the Rabbi, the boys, the caretaker and the firemen with their net all kneel. In this omnipotent posture he forces Binder to go through a catechism that ends with the Rabbi saying "God...can make a child without intercourse" (R, p. 157). The mother the caretaker and the boys and the firemen are then all forced to make the same confession to Ozzie, who then requires the multitude to confess singly and then in chorus that they believe in Jesus Christ. There is yet a triumph to compel. Ozzie turns an exhausted, weepy voice, his boy's voice which Roth says has the sound of an exhausted bell-wringer's, to his mother, tells her she shouldn't hit him, or anybody ever about God, and when she asks him to come down, makes her promise first that she'll "never hit anybody about God" (R, p. 158). Although he's only asked the grey-haired madonna (Ozzie's earthly father is teasingly symbolically absent from the story through death) everyone kneeling in the street makes the promise. Roth ends Ozzie's impossible performance this way.

Once again there was silence.

"I can come down now, Mamma," the boy on the roof finally said. He turned his head both ways as though checking the traffic lights. "Now I can come down..."

And he did, right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo (R, p. 158).

- 11 Both senses of "other"--the reverse and the additional--which were invoked at the beginning of this essay play through Ozzie's conversion of the Jews. He has compelled Binder to tell him the different thing he wanted to know, to reverse himself and admit that Jewish exclusiveness cannot bind God. This much is righteousness and converts Jews not to Christianity, but back to the ethos of loving and exemplary obedience to God which their status as "chosen" was meant to secure when it was first announced to Abraham. Ozzie's prophetic compelling of the crowd to confess belief in Jesus Christ is pure bravado, the exuberance of an Alexander in short pants, and certainly not an acceptance on their part or on his of Christian dogma or worship. Indeed the whole scene is a burlesque of both. Roth's comic reduction of salvation through martyrdom makes that much perfectly clear. But something Christian is required by the boy of his people, something Christians have consistently proved to be exemplary failures in, something Christians were told by Jesus himself was the basis of the law and the prophets. In his

commandment that no one violate their neighbor for God's sake, Ozzie condenses what Jesus in Mark 12, 29-31 cites to demonstrate his authority as a religious teacher against the scribes, the Binders of his day, who view him as a subversive interloper.

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God in one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

- 12 Jesus claims, and Christians believe, that he not only obeys and preaches these commandments, but exemplifies them uniquely by instantiating, in his living presence, the God who set them forth to establish the proper relation of human life to him. God is now no longer the reverse of you, but another one of you, and loving him should be all that more compelling, immediate, and pure. This fusion of otherness as difference and as similarity in the logic of the Incarnation is the conversion Jesus urged on his contemporary Jews. Ozzie also feels himself to be an exemplary instantiation of God's power and peace, and the mixture of delusion and insight on his part may very well be Roth's final word in the story on Christ's mentality. But the ethos of the Incarnation is certainly included in the broken-hearted injunction Ozzie closes the story with. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself Jesus says is like the first commandment, thou shalt love thy God exclusively and exhaustively. The identification here of exclusive and exhaustive love is the theological basis for the humanism, Christian in one aspect, Jewish in another, of Ozzie's belief, to which he converts the Jews, that "You should never hit anybody about God" (R, p. 158) Exclusive love of God means exhaustive love of humankind. Exclusive and exhaustive love are two sides of the one Jewish coin, and of the additional Christian coin, and of the coin that is Judeo-Christian. In Ozzie Freedman's glorious tantrum on the pinnacle of a synagogue, Philip Roth comically condenses a strife over Jewish "otherness" that has in many ways defined the Christian world as much as it has the Jewish one. Ozzie is able to turn martyrdom as a resolution of that strife into a boy-man's righteous game. Whoever has meditated on the cross might profit much from imagining the look on Ozzie's face as he leaps into the firemen's net that Roth has made this new man's halo.

NOTES

1. Philip Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews" in *Goodbye Columbus*, (New York: Vintage International, 1993), p. 141. The story originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1959.
2. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (New York, Random House, 1961), p. 689.

RÉSUMÉS

Fondamentalement dans la religion traditionnelle, l'idée qu'entre tous les peuples et nations Dieu a marqué son choix pour le Peuple Élu, à la fois préservé et mis en péril la vie des juifs. Fondée sur ce concept, l'identité culturelle imposée à un jeune garçon qui, dans la nouvelle "La conversion des juifs" de Philip Roth, prépare sa Bar Mitzvah, engendre chez celui-ci une crise de conscience. La manière comique par laquelle sa crise se résout semble remettre en question cette idée du choix de Dieu, choix qui pourrait être humain avant d'être divin.